

Assembly Bill No. 2310

CHAPTER 572

An act to amend Section 366.26 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, relating to juvenile placement determinations.

[Approved by Governor September 17, 1998. Filed
with Secretary of State September 18, 1998.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 2310, R. Wright. Juveniles: placement determination: adoption.

(1) Existing law authorizes the juvenile court to conduct a hearing on the issue of whether to permanently terminate parental rights with regard to certain children who have been declared dependents of the juvenile court. Existing law authorizes several alternative dispositions that may be made by the court, including permanently terminating parental rights and placing the minor for adoption, and identifying adoption as the permanent placement goal without terminating parental rights.

This bill would revise and recast provisions regarding those alternative dispositions to set forth an order of preference for those dispositions. The bill would permit the court to identify adoption as the permanent goal without terminating parental rights only where the court finds that termination of parental rights would not be detrimental to the child and that it is probable that the child will be adopted but is difficult to place.

(2) Existing law requires the court, at the hearing described in (1), to terminate parental rights only if it determines by clear and convincing evidence that it is likely that the minor will be adopted.

This bill would revise that provision to direct the court to terminate parental rights and order the child placed for adoption, if it determines, based on a specified assessment and any other relevant evidence, by a clear and convincing standard, that it is likely the child will be adopted, as specified.

The people of the State of California do enact as follows:

SECTION 1. Section 366.26 of the Welfare and Institutions Code is amended to read:

366.26. (a) This section applies to minors who are adjudged dependent children of the juvenile court pursuant to subdivision (c) of Section 360 on or after January 1, 1989. The procedures specified herein are the exclusive procedures for conducting these hearings; Part 2 (commencing with Section 3020) of Division 8 of the Family

Code is not applicable to these proceedings. Section 8714.7 of the Family Code is applicable and available to all dependent children meeting the requirements of that section. For minors who are adjudged dependent children of the juvenile court pursuant to subdivision (c) of Section 360 on or after January 1, 1989, this section and Sections 8604, 8605, 8606, and 8700 of the Family Code and Chapter 5 (commencing with Section 7660) of Part 3 of Division 12 of the Family Code specify the exclusive procedures for permanently terminating parental rights with regard to, or establishing legal guardianship of, the minor while the minor is a dependent child of the juvenile court.

(b) At the hearing, which shall be held in juvenile court for all minors who are dependents of the juvenile court, the court, in order to provide stable, permanent homes for these minors, shall review the report as specified in Section 361.5, 366.21, or 366.22, shall indicate that the court has read and considered it, shall receive other evidence that the parties may present, and then shall make findings and orders in the following order of preference:

(1) Terminate the rights of the parent or parents and order that the minor be placed for adoption and, upon the filing of a petition for adoption in the juvenile court, order that a hearing be set. The court shall proceed with the adoption after the appellate rights of the natural parents have been exhausted.

(2) On making a finding under paragraph (3) of subdivision (c), identify adoption as the permanent placement goal and order that efforts be made to locate an appropriate adoptive family for the child within a period not to exceed 90 days.

(3) Appoint a legal guardian for the child and order that letters of guardianship issue.

(4) Order that the minor be placed in long-term foster care, subject to the regular review of the juvenile court.

In choosing among the above alternatives the court shall proceed pursuant to subdivision (c).

(c) The court shall conduct the hearing as follows:

(1) If the court determines, based on the assessment provided as ordered under subdivision (i) of Section 366.21 or subdivision (b) of Section 366.22, and any other relevant evidence, by a clear and convincing standard, that it is likely the child will be adopted, the court shall terminate parental rights and order the child placed for adoption. The fact that the child is not yet placed in a pre-adoptive home nor with a relative or foster family who is prepared to adopt the child, shall not constitute a basis for the court to conclude that it is not likely the child will be adopted. A finding under subdivision (b) or paragraph (1) of subdivision (e) of Section 361.5 that reunification services shall not be offered, under subdivision (e) of Section 366.21 that the whereabouts of a parent have been unknown for six months, that the parent has failed to visit or contact the child for six months,

or that the parent has been convicted of a felony indicating parental unfitness, or under Section 366.21 or 366.22 that the court has continued to remove the child from the custody of the parent or guardian and has terminated reunification services, shall constitute a sufficient basis for termination of parental rights unless the court finds that termination of parental rights would be detrimental to the child because of one or more of the following circumstances:

(A) The parents or guardians have maintained regular visitation and contact with the minor and the minor would benefit from continuing the relationship.

(B) A minor 12 years of age or older objects to termination of parental rights.

(C) The minor is placed in a residential treatment facility, adoption is unlikely or undesirable, and continuation of parental rights will not prevent finding the minor a permanent family placement if the parents cannot resume custody when residential care is no longer needed.

(D) The minor is living with a relative or foster parent who is unable or unwilling to adopt the minor because of exceptional circumstances, which do not include an unwillingness to accept legal or financial responsibility for the minor, but who is willing and capable of providing the minor with a stable and permanent environment and the removal of the minor from the physical custody of his or her relative or foster parent would be detrimental to the emotional well-being of the minor. This subparagraph does not apply to any minor who is living with a nonrelative and who is either (i) under six years of age or (ii) a member of a sibling group where at least one minor is under six years of age and the siblings are, or should be, permanently placed together.

If the court finds that termination of parental rights would be detrimental to the child pursuant to subparagraph (A), (B), (C), or (D), it shall state its reasons in writing or on the record.

(2) The court shall not terminate parental rights if at each and every hearing at which the court was required to consider reasonable efforts or services, the court has found that reasonable efforts were not made or that reasonable services were not offered or provided.

(3) If the court finds that termination of parental rights would not be detrimental to the minor pursuant to paragraph (1) and that the minor has a probability for adoption but is difficult to place for adoption and there is no identified or available prospective adoptive parent, the court may identify adoption as the permanent placement goal and without terminating parental rights, order that efforts be made to locate an appropriate adoptive family for the minor within a period not to exceed 90 days. During this 90-day period, the public agency responsible for seeking adoptive parents, for each minor shall, to the extent possible, contact other private and public adoption agencies regarding the availability of the minor for adoption. During



the 90-day period, the public agency shall conduct the search for adoptive parents in the same manner as prescribed for children in Sections 8708 and 8709 of the Family Code. At the expiration of this period, another hearing shall be held and the court shall proceed pursuant to paragraph (1), (3), or (4) of subdivision (b). For purposes of this section, a minor may only be found to be difficult to place for adoption if there is no identified or available prospective adoptive parent for the minor because of the minor's membership in a sibling group, or the presence of a diagnosed medical, physical, or mental handicap, or the minor is the age of seven years or more.

(4) If the court finds that adoption of the minor or termination of parental rights is not in the best interests of the minor, because one of the conditions in subparagraph (A), (B), (C), or (D) of paragraph (1) or in paragraph (2) applies, the court shall either order that the present caretakers or other appropriate persons shall become legal guardians of the minor or order that the minor remain in long-term foster care. Legal guardianship shall be considered before long-term foster care, if it is in the best interests of the minor and if a suitable guardian can be found. When the minor is living with a relative or a foster parent who is willing and capable of providing a stable and permanent environment, but not willing to become a legal guardian, the minor shall not be removed from the home if the court finds the removal would be seriously detrimental to the emotional well-being of the minor because the minor has substantial psychological ties to the relative caretaker or foster parents. The court shall also make an order for visitation with the parents or guardians unless the court finds by a preponderance of the evidence that the visitation would be detrimental to the physical or emotional well-being of the minor.

(5) If the court finds that the minor should not be placed for adoption, that legal guardianship shall not be established, and that there are no suitable foster parents except exclusive-use homes available to provide the minor with a stable and permanent environment, the court may order the care, custody, and control of the minor transferred from the county welfare department or probation department to a licensed foster family agency. The court shall consider the written recommendation of the county welfare director or chief probation officer regarding the suitability of that transfer. The transfer shall be subject to further court orders.

The licensed foster family agency shall place the minor in a suitable licensed or exclusive-use home which has been certified by the agency as meeting licensing standards. The licensed foster family agency shall be responsible for supporting the minor and for providing appropriate services to the minor, including those services ordered by the court. Responsibility for the support of the minor shall not, in and of itself, create liability on the part of the foster family agency to third persons injured by the minor. Those minors whose care, custody, and control are transferred to a foster family agency



shall not be eligible for foster care maintenance payments or child welfare services, except for emergency response services pursuant to Section 16504.

(d) The proceeding for the appointment of a guardian for a minor who is a dependent of the juvenile court shall be in the juvenile court. If the court finds pursuant to this section that legal guardianship is the appropriate permanency plan, it shall appoint the legal guardian and issue letters of guardianship. The assessment prepared pursuant to subdivision (g) of Section 361.5, subdivision (i) of Section 366.21, and subdivision (b) of Section 366.22 shall be read and considered by the court prior to the appointment, and this shall be reflected in the minutes of the court. The person preparing the assessment may be called and examined by any party to the proceeding.

(e) The proceeding for the adoption of a minor who is a dependent of the juvenile court shall be in the juvenile court if the court finds pursuant to this section that adoption is the appropriate permanency plan and the petition for adoption is filed in the juvenile court. Upon the filing of a petition for adoption, the juvenile court shall order that an adoption hearing be set. The court shall proceed with the adoption after the appellate rights of the natural parents have been exhausted. The full report required by Section 8715 of the Family Code shall be read and considered by the court prior to the adoption and this shall be reflected in the minutes of the court. The person preparing the report may be called and examined by any party to the proceeding. It is the intent of the Legislature, pursuant to this subdivision, to give potential adoptive parents the option of filing in the juvenile court the petition for the adoption of a minor who is a dependent of the juvenile court. Nothing in this section is intended to prevent the filing of that petition for adoption in any other court as permitted by law, instead of in the juvenile court.

(f) At the beginning of any proceeding pursuant to this section, if the minor or the parents are not being represented by previously retained or appointed counsel, the court shall proceed as follows:

(1) The court shall consider whether the interests of the minor require the appointment of counsel. If the court finds that the interests of the minor do require this protection, the court shall appoint counsel to represent the minor. If the court finds that the interests of the minor require the representation of counsel, counsel shall be appointed whether or not the minor is able to afford counsel. The minor shall not be present in court unless the minor or the minor's counsel so requests or the court so orders.

(2) If a parent appears without counsel and is unable to afford counsel, the court shall appoint counsel for the parent, unless this representation is knowingly and intelligently waived. The same counsel shall not be appointed to represent both the minor and his or her parent. The public defender or private counsel may be appointed as counsel for the parent.



(3) Private counsel appointed under this section shall receive a reasonable sum for compensation and expenses, the amount of which shall be determined by the court. The amount shall be paid by the real parties in interest, other than the minor, in any proportions the court deems just. However, if the court finds that any of the real parties in interest are unable to afford counsel, the amount shall be paid out of the general fund of the county.

(g) The court may continue the proceeding for not to exceed 30 days as necessary to appoint counsel, and to enable counsel to become acquainted with the case.

(h) At all proceedings under this section, the court shall consider the wishes of the minor and shall act in the best interests of the minor.

The testimony of the minor may be taken in chambers and outside the presence of the minor's parent or parents if the minor's parent or parents are represented by counsel, the counsel is present, and any of the following circumstances exist:

(1) The court determines that testimony in chambers is necessary to ensure truthful testimony.

(2) The minor is likely to be intimidated by a formal courtroom setting.

(3) The minor is afraid to testify in front of his or her parent or parents.

After testimony in chambers, the parent or parents of the minor may elect to have the court reporter read back the testimony or have the testimony summarized by counsel for the parent or parents.

The testimony of a minor also may be taken in chambers and outside the presence of the guardian or guardians of a minor under the circumstances specified in this subdivision.

(i) Any order of the court permanently terminating parental rights under this section shall be conclusive and binding upon the minor person, upon the parent or parents and upon all other persons who have been served with citation by publication or otherwise as provided in this chapter. After making such an order, the court shall have no power to set aside, change, or modify it, but nothing in this section shall be construed to limit the right to appeal the order.

(j) If the court, by order or judgment declares the minor free from the custody and control of both parents, or one parent if the other does not have custody and control, the court shall at the same time order the minor referred to the State Department of Social Services or a licensed adoption agency for adoptive placement by the agency. However, no petition for adoption may be granted until the appellate rights of the natural parents have been exhausted. The State Department of Social Services or licensed adoption agency shall be responsible for the custody and supervision of the minor and shall be entitled to the exclusive care and control of the minor at all times until a petition for adoption is granted. With the consent of the

agency, the court may appoint a guardian of the minor, who shall serve until the minor is adopted.

(k) Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the application of any person who, as a relative caretaker or foster parent, has cared for a dependent child for whom the court has approved a permanent plan for adoption, or who has been freed for adoption, shall be given preference with respect to that minor over all other applications for adoptive placement if the agency making the placement determines that the minor has substantial emotional ties to the relative caretaker or foster parent and removal from the relative caretaker or foster parent would be seriously detrimental to the minor's emotional well-being.

As used in this subdivision, "preference" means that the application shall be processed and, if satisfactory, the family study shall be completed before the processing of the application of any other person for the adoptive placement of the minor.

(l) (1) An order by the court that a hearing pursuant to this section be held is not appealable at any time unless all of the following applies:

(A) A petition for extraordinary writ review was filed in a timely manner.

(B) The petition substantively addressed the specific issues to be challenged and supported that challenge by an adequate record.

(C) The petition for extraordinary writ review was summarily denied or otherwise not decided on the merits.

(2) Failure to file a petition for extraordinary writ review within the period specified by rule, to substantively address the specific issues challenged, or to support that challenge by an adequate record shall preclude subsequent review by appeal of the findings and orders made pursuant to this section.

(3) The Judicial Council shall adopt rules of court, effective January 1, 1995, to ensure all of the following:

(A) A trial court, after issuance of an order directing a hearing pursuant to this section be held, shall advise all parties of the requirement of filing a petition for extraordinary writ review as set forth in this subdivision in order to preserve any right to appeal in these issues. This notice shall be made orally to a party if they are present at the time of the making of the order or by first-class mail by the clerk of the court to the last known address of a party not present at the time of the making of the order.

(B) The prompt transmittal of the records from the trial court to the appellate court.

(C) That adequate time requirements for counsel and court personnel exist to implement the objective of this subdivision.

(D) That the parent or guardian, or their trial counsel or other counsel, is charged with the responsibility of filing a petition for extraordinary writ relief pursuant to this subdivision.

(4) The intent of this subdivision is to do both of the following:

(A) Make every reasonable attempt to achieve a substantive and meritorious review by the appellate court within the time specified in Sections 366.21 and 366.22 for holding a hearing pursuant to this section.

(B) Encourage the appellate court to determine all writ petitions filed pursuant to this subdivision on their merits.

(5) This subdivision shall only apply to cases in which an order to set a hearing pursuant to this section is issued on or after January 1, 1995.

(m) This section shall be operative January 1, 1999.

